Conspiracy theories

From Encyclopedia of Group Processes and Intergroup Relations

Conspiracy theories are sets of often erroneous beliefs that people use to explain malevolent and/or unlawful acts that are perceived to be directed by and in favor of a small and powerful group that works in secret against a larger group of unwitting victims. This entry describes research on conspiracy theories as well as closely related phenomena. It starts by considering the association between conspiracy theories and rumors and the social functions of stereotypes. Next, it describes the research findings on conspiracy theories—when they are most likely to be conceived, the nature of the people who subscribe to conspiracy theories, and the theories’ effects. The entry concludes by describing explanations for the existence of conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking.

Conspiracy Theories and Related Phenomena

Given that there is little research on conspiracy theories, it is worthwhile to consider the properties that most conspiracy theories share: Conspiracy theories are usually conceived as explanations for events that provoke widespread social anxiety and uncertainty, conditions under which people are eager for explanations; the content of conspiracies is emotionally laden and their discovery can be gratifying; the evidentiary standards for corroborating conspiracy theories is typically weak, but conspiracies that survive in the public consciousness are resistant to falsification; the survivability of conspiracy theories is aided by psychological biases and distrust of official sources; and conspiracy theories of one form or another are held by most people.

Conspiracy theories and rumors are examples of informal social communications. As such, they share several properties. First, rumors are particularly likely to flourish during periods of social uncertainty and anxiety. Indeed, rumor research began in the 1940s as rumors came to the attention of government officials who were concerned that they would undermine the war effort. Second, the definition of rumor, proposed by Robert Knapp as “a proposition for belief of topical reference disseminated without official verification,” is similar to but more general than the definition of conspiracy theories. Third, Knapp noted that the content of rumors expresses and gratifies collective emotional needs. This
emotional dimension differentiates rumor from news. So, for example, the news that Churchill is now in Washington is likely to elicit little emotion compared with the rumor that the Jews are avoiding the draft. It is, of course, a small step to conclude that the latter rumor could blossom into a conspiracy.

Knapp showed that rumor content can be coded with respect to its emotional content. A sample of 1,089 rumors collected in 1942 showed that 2% were wish based (e.g., the Japanese do not have enough oil to last 6 months), 25% were fear based (e.g., the entire Pacific Fleet was lost at Pearl Harbor), 66% were hostile (e.g., that Churchill blackmailed Roosevelt into provoking war with Japan), and 7% escaped categorization. It is noteworthy that of all the rumors, 50% concerned intergroup tensions, and they were mostly antiadministration (i.e., government, army, and navy), anti-British, or anti-Semitic. The emotional content of rumor is suspiciously similar to that in conspiracy theories, and is predominantly focused on intergroup relations. Rumors are often slanderous, express intergroup hostilities, and scapegoat minority groups.

In 1981, Henri Tajfel proposed a functional account of stereotyping: Stereotypes provide positive images for ingroups, justify actions committed or planned, and provide explanations for widespread social uncertainties. In fact, many of the stereotypes identified by Tajfel fulfill all of these functions simultaneously. For example, Nazi propaganda depicted Jews as child molesters, explained German hyperinflation in the 1920s as the result of Jews controlling the banking system, and explained that Jews were plotting world domination. In this case, the accusations were depictions of Jews that were intentionally diffused by Nazi propagandists in an attempt to forge a common outgroup to promote German unity and serve Nazi aspirations for further power.

Conspiracy theories, rumors, and stereotypes have existed for centuries. Historical accounts demonstrate that tens of thousands of women accused of being witches were tortured and killed in Europe from the 15th through 17th centuries. The identification of women as witches was largely driven by rumor and religious superstition, and appears to have been more likely to occur during crop failures. In the modern world, rumors and conspiracies are now easier to diffuse than at any time in the past. While this is true, there is reason for optimism. On a historical time line, superstition is in decline; skepticism, rationality, and the scientific method are on the increase; and perhaps most importantly, it is possible to combat false rumors using the same technology that aids their spread.

**Research on Conspiracy Theories**

**When Do Conspiracy Theories Arise?**

Conspiracies often originate in government propaganda that is designed to manufacture support for war. Enemies are said to be conspiring to launch an attack, are developing weapons, or are implicated in an attack on the homeland. For example, in the lead up to the Iraq war in 2003, polls showed that 22% of the American population believed that Iraq was directly involved in the attacks on September 11, 2001, while a further 35% believed that Iraq was not directly involved, but had given substantial support to Al Qaeda. Further, 32% claimed that it was very likely, and 37% believed it somewhat likely that Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the September 11th attacks. Over time, 21% to 24% of Americans believed that weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq. These false beliefs developed independently of political affiliation, and were more far more prevalent for viewers of some news sources (e.g., Fox News) than others (e.g., PBS). The more of these false conspiracy beliefs that people possessed, the more they were in favor of war with Iraq. Like stereotypes, conspiracies can be used to justify planned actions.

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/conspiracy_theories
Conspiratorial thinking increases in prevalence when there are widespread social uncertainties, as found during war or in the aftermath of terrorist attacks, and when there are natural disasters like tsunamis or earthquakes or outbreaks of lethal disease. This fact is evidenced by the profusion of documentaries, books, movies, and magazine articles dedicated to explaining events like the September 11th terrorist attacks, and the more than 2,000 volumes on John F. Kennedy's assassination. This suggests that conspiratorial thinking is driven by a strong human desire to make sense of social forces that are self-relevant, important, and threatening.

Who Subscribes to Conspiracy Theories?

While there is some evidence for individual differences that lead people to be more or less susceptible to belief in conspiracy theories, it is also true that some conspiracy theories are believed by large majorities of the population. For example, there is evidence that approximately 90% of the American population believe that President Kennedy was assassinated by a conspiracy of one or more of the following: Cuban exiles, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Mafia, the Dallas police, pentagon officials, and/or Lyndon Johnson, as opposed to the official lone suspect, Lee Harvey Oswald. In fact, polling data suggest that most people believe in at least some conspiracies.

Research suggests that in general people tend to either believe in conspiracies or not. It shows that general belief in conspiracies has several correlates. First, while there is no evidence for associations with gender, education level, or occupation, there is evidence that Blacks and Hispanics are more likely to believe conspiracies than are Whites. The association between ethnicity and belief in conspiracies appears to be mediated by anomie (a sense of social dislocation) and lack of trust in other people, the police, and government. Further, people are also particularly likely to believe in conspiracies that they feel are directed at their group. Blacks, for example, are particularly likely to believe that the federal government plants drugs in their communities.

Outcomes of Belief in Conspiracy Theories

Exposure to media that endorse conspiracies increases belief. There is evidence that viewing the Oliver Stone movie JFK increased belief in the conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy and decreased belief in the official account that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. A further outcome was that compared with people who were about to view the movie, those who had seen it expressed less interest in political participation. It may be that distrust of those in power predicts and is caused by belief in government conspiracies.

Given relatively high rates of incidence of AIDS and sexual transmitted infections among Blacks, researchers have investigated belief in AIDS conspiracies—that AIDS was created by the federal government to kill Blacks—and attitudes toward condom use. This research has shown that the more male Blacks believe in this conspiracy, the less favorable their attitudes toward condom use are, and in turn the less likely they are to use condoms. There is also evidence that these beliefs lead to distrust of research institutions and are a significant barrier to getting Blacks to participate in AIDS clinical trials.

An alternative possibility is that Blacks have developed these beliefs because of real discrimination. For example, starting in 1932 and continuing for 40 years, the Public Health Service working with the Tuskegee Institute studied the effect of syphilis on the bodies of 399 Black men by withholding treatment and allowing them to die, despite the discovery of penicillin as a standard cure in 1947. It is clearly worth noting that governments do at least occasionally conspire against their own citizens.
Explanations for Conspiracy Theories

Richard Hofstadter's work in history explored the emergence of conspiracy theorizing within American democracy. Hofstadter's vision was a consensus view of democracy; competing groups would represent the interests of individuals, but would do so within a political system that everyone agreed would frame the bounds of conflict. For Hofstadter, people who felt unable to channel their political interests into representative groups would become alienated from this system, which would make them vulnerable to charismatic rather than practical and rational leadership, and would eventually undermine democracy and lead to totalitarian rule. Those so alienated from the system would not trust the statements of opposition parties as being a fair disagreement, rather, differences in views would be regarded with deep suspicion. Such people alienated from the system would develop a paranoid fear of conspiracy.

According to Hofstadter, the paranoid style is not individual pathology, rather, it originates in social conflict that raises fears and anxieties, leading to status struggles between opposed groups. The paranoid style and resulting conspiracy theorizing derives from a collective sense of threat to one's group, culture, way of life, and so on. Extremists on either side of the political spectrum could be expected to develop a paranoid style. On the right, McCarthyism represented the paranoid style—paranoid notions of rife communist infiltration of American institutions; on the left are examples such as the conspiracy of slaveholders against abolitionists or fears of international bankers.

Hofstadter's approach is notable because it places the root of conspiracies in intergroup processes, which means that his theory can account for the ebb and flow of conspiracy theories over time. Since Hofstadter's theory was conceived, however, there have been a number of advances in social psychology that can account for the role of biases in information processing.

Psychological Biases

*Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization.* John McHoskey provided an explanation for the difficulty of falsifying conspiracy theories. McHoskey gave advocates and opponents of the JFK conspiracy a balanced description of arguments for and against the conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy. His proposal was that people who favored or opposed the conspiracy theory would regard the statement as evidence in favor of their position. This would occur because proponents on both sides engaged in biased assimilation. According to this phenomenon, information that supports one's position is uncritically accepted, whereas contrary information is scrutinized and discredited. Further, because of attitude polarization, when people encounter ambiguous information, they tend to endorse their original position even more strongly than they did prior to encountering the information. This proved to be the case for both advocates and opponents of the JFK conspiracy.

*The Fundamental Attribution Error.* Philosopher Steve Clarke proposed that conspiratorial thinking is maintained by the fundamental attribution error. According to the fundamental attribution error, people overestimate the importance of dispositions (e.g., individual motivations or personality traits) and underestimate the importance of situational factors (e.g., random chance, social norms, and so on) in explaining the behavior of other people. Clarke pointed out that conspiratorial thinking typically makes this error, asserting that devious, self-interested, or malevolent people conspire to make some event come to fruition, such as an assassination, terrorist attack, or elaborate cover up. People maintain adherence to their conspiratorial thinking because to dispense with the conspiracy would be to
discount human motives in events. Research provides much evidence that people commit the fundamental attribution error.

Further, Clarke suggests that the ultimate reason that people make the fundamental attribution error is because we are evolved to do so. His reasoning is that we evolved in tightly knit groups where understanding the motives of others was critical for the detection of malevolent intentions. Clearly, the cost of making an error in identifying others' insidious motives is small relative to the cost of not identifying such motives, and so we are psychologically attuned to discount situational factors over dispositional factors in explaining others' behavior.

See also
Cults, Nationalism and Patriotism, Rumor, Social Representations, Stereotyping, Terrorism

Further Readings


Reid, Scott A.

